

Balancing Cultures and Motherhood

Asma and Taylor

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In the previous episode, you heard about Asma's awareness of the differences between the cultures she's lived in and her need to balance these ways of seeing the world in her daily life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her role as a mother of three young children.

Throughout my conversations with Asma, I noticed her commitment to her role as a teacher—of both cultures. Asma feels a profound concern that her children need to learn about Somalia. She wants to teach them about the culture, language, and religion of her and her husband's home. In fact, this is so important, that she wanted to include this in our conclusion to her story.

It is
important
to have
both
cultures

A: So, being refugee, is a lot of hard work.

T: Mhm.

A: The parents. Because...they wanna teach their kids...something of their religions, of their cultures. And they also wanna be a part of the country they live.

T: Mhm.

A: So, a lot of kids get confused—

T: Yeah.

A: —But a lot of kids get success. We, we have a lot of S-Somalian kids get success for religion in Islamic school...

T: "Success," is that what you're saying?

A: Success, yes, they get success, yeah. Islamic school, um, both, and school, too.

T: Mhm.

A: And graduate high school and finish the Qur'an.

T: Cool.

A: And learn some messages, yeah, and um, yeah. Even the weekend, we are not gonna rest.

T: Yeah.

A: We will always fight. [laughs] Yeah.

T: [laughs] "Even the weekend, we're not gonna rest."

A: Yeah.

T: "We'll always fight."

A: [laughs] Yes.

Despite Asma's uncertainties about motherhood, she has clearly stepped into this role with an incredible sense of curiosity and commitment to doing the best job she can. I found that

commitment especially admirable as she described how she found the right “tools” to help raise her children.

Boyle and Ali (2010) write about the crucial role the extended family typically plays in Somali households, and when individuals leave those networks and move around the world, they lose access to much of the knowledge and support their mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles provide. Asma has recently been able to reach her mother and aunts by phone, but that is clearly not enough, especially because she is raising her children in an entirely unique environment and culture.

Google and YouTube, then, become the replacement support network that Asma lost when she left Somalia. I found this particularly interesting because while she has developed a community of Somali connections throughout the United States, many of these connections are merely virtual and not a constant source of support. The internet, then, is Asma’s chief mothering tool.

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A: So I tried to watch the “Super Nanny,” I try to, try to talk the way she give advice for the parents.

T: Mhm.

A: And then, and then that was for managing at home, without no teacher. And then after that, I uh, I start to watch it, same thing as that, watching how to, how to teach.

T: Mhm.

A: Eh, how to teach two-years old, how to teach one-years old. Like letters, ABC, activity [??].

T: Mhm.

A: Um, sometime I buy some easy painting...

T: Yeah.

A: ... At the stores, and, and put them something. But I don’t know how to do because my, my country, we never played the paint, paint, or something like that.

T: Mhm.

A: So I tried to learn from video how to kids paint.

T: Mhm.

A: How to kids, blocks... I never play blocks back home, we don’t have blocks back home.

T: Yeah.

A: We can play, have, have free toys everywhere, but not blocks.

T: Yeah.

A: How, how to play the blocks—simple life, I watch everything here, no one teach me here, I didn’t go to school for that.

T: Did you, so you didn't talk to anybody here? You just did it online?

A: I just learn everything online. Even how to change the diaper, I learn it online [laughs].

T: Really?

A: Even how to change a diaper, I watch it YouTube! I swear to God, the YouTube teach me a lot of things.

And since these tools have taught her about the way a mother in the United States raises her children, Asma and her husband are incredibly aware of the differences between the two cultures. One other example she brought up is the respect of one's elders. Muna, who has not started school yet, is more Somali in her more demure interactions with her parents, but Muhammad looks right at her and is far more demanding—Asma believes this is because he has spent more time in a Pre-K class that incorporates more American values in their teaching styles.

In a way, then, Asma is also aware of the lack of agency she has in balancing cultures while raising her children because of the persistent influence of the environment. This, too, is a source of tension with her husband, who seems to prefer teaching their children more about Somali culture. However, Asma's discussions of these familial tensions are difficult to get a read on, as in the following clip, where I am not sure if her husband is criticizing her or encouraging her use of the internet as a parenting tool:

Right

A: Oooh, my daughter, too.

T: Yeah.

A: She say something and you will never understand it. Sometimes you get tired and you say, "Okay," and she doesn't want an 'okay,' she wants an answer.

T: Yeah. I love it.

A: She keeps telling and telling and telling, and he say, "You always like to fix the kids, uh, what language they're talking, give them homework, try to..." He see me like, um, trying to adapt this country exact, the culture exactly what it is.

T: Yeah.

A: But when you like some culture, you want to adopt it, right?

T: Yeah.

A: I like this culture, I want to adopt it.

T: Yeah.

A: And then, uh, my husband say, "You always go to computer and try to, try to find how to raise, eh, eh, eh, tolerance [toddlers], how to speak with the tolerance, how to manage the tolerance. Why don't you find this girl for that, how to speak like..." [laughs]

T: Yeah.

A: I say, "I need help for that! I cannot teach her!"

What *she* is most concerned with, then, is giving her children all the knowledge they can so that they can make that choice themselves. As she navigates that sea of multicultural currents, Asma is taking as much control of the rudder as possible, but she also understands the gravity of the United States current and its permeation of her current life.

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